(17)

Christian Arguments for Social and Public Worship.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE

AN ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF

PROTESTANT DISSENTING MINISTERS,

AT THE

CHAPEL IN LEWIN's MEAD, BRISTOL,

On FRIDAY, the 13th of APRIL, 1792,

AND PUBLISHED AT THE UNITED REQUEST OF

THE MINISTERS AND GENTLEMEN WHO HEARD IT.

BY

JOHN SIMPSON.

BATH,
PRINTED BY R. CRUTTWELL,
AND SOLD BY
J. JOHNSON, NO. 72, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD, LONDON.

M DCC XCII.

[Price SIX-PENCE.]

ADVERTISEMENT.

THOSE parts of the following diſcourſe which relate to the example and precepts of the Apoſtles, and the ſpirit of Chriſtianity, were not preached. But theſe topics having been mentioned in it, as furniſhing grounds of further argument, they are now added, to complete the original deſign, and to render it more proper for the preſs.

The idea that Social Worſhip is not a Chriſtian Duty, is publiſhed in "An Enquiry into the Expe-" diency and Propriety of Public or Social Worſhip: " by Gilbert Wakefield, B. A. late Fellow of Jeſus-" College, Cambridge." And it has been credibly reported, that a few others have adopted his ſentiment. The new tranſlation, from which ſome paſſages are quoted, is that which Mr. Wakefield has lately publiſhed of the whole New Teſtament.

MARK xi. 17.

AND HE TAUGHT, SAYING UNTO THEM, IS IT NOT WRITTEN, MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED OF ALL NATIONS THE HOUSE OF PRAYER?

PARTICULAR precepts, reſpecting every circumſtance of the life of each individual, though He who formed us might undoubtedly communicate, would be too voluminous to be applicable to practice. The Author of our being, therefore, has taken a more ſuitable, comprehenſive, and effectual way of inſtructing us in our duty, by implanting reaſon and conſcience within us, affording us the means of improving our

natural faculties, and giving us accounts of the extraordinary meaſures which he has condeſcended to employ, for enlightening the underſtandings of men in divine truth, and purifying their hearts and lives.

In theſe hiſtories are contained, ſketches of the lives both of good and bad perſons, and alſo general moral and religious principles, which a ſincere mind may apply to the ſeveral occurrences of human life. The Deity, even in his moſt perfect communication of divine truths, has not conveyed them, either in the abſtruſe way of regular deduction and argument, or by a diſtinct and ſeparate enumeration of them. But he has communicated them, in memoirs of the life and actions of the great Meſſiah and his Apoſtles, interſperſed with inſtructions as they occaſionally delivered them; to which are added, letters of the Apoſtles to different Chriſtian

Chriſtian churches and individuals, and a prophetic narrative of the future ſtate of the church, 'till the conſummation. And he has left us to apply the characters delineated in the ſcriptures to our own ſituations and circumſtances, and to extend the general rules to particular caſes, or to limit their operation, as every man's own underſtanding, accompanied with an honeſt heart, ſhall direct.

We do not look into our New Teſtament, therefore, as the diſciple of Moſes did into his ceremonial law, for a minute and circumſtantial deſcription of any particular obſervance that he ſhould perform; nor as the lawyer does into his book of ſtatutes, or his liſt of adjudged caſes, for precedents and directions exactly tallying with our own particular circumſtances; but we look, chiefly, for the general principles laid down by Chriſt and his Apoſtles, and for the general ſpirit

of their inſtructions. And if they have further illuſtrated any of theſe, by a more particular precept, or by an application of the general principle to ſome one or more caſes, we take theſe illuſtrations in conjunction with the general principle, for our guide. And occaſions have ſo frequently occurred to them, that the moral attributes of Deity, his providence, and moral government of the world, and the duties we owe to him in the ſeveral relations in which we ſtand to him, as well as the duties to our fellow-creatures and ourſelves, have, moſt of them, been particularly mentioned and illuſtrated, and the duties expreſsly enjoined. But, in a caſe where no peculiar precept, or application of moral truth to the particular circumſtance, is upon record, we can ſtill point out to ourſelves a truly Chriſtian rule, without this ſpecification. A rule which becomes as truly obligatory upon the ſincere diſciple of Jeſus, as if it were in ſo many words commanded by our Saviour.

The

The Chriſtian law is a law of ſuch enlarged liberty, that it ſolemnly enjoins upon us, in order to ſecure our own freedom and happineſs, every thing which we ourſelves diſcern to be immediately obligatory, or the proper and neceſſary means of liberating us from the fetters of ſuperſtition and vice; though the circumſtances in which Chriſt and his Apoſtles were, ſhould not have led them to have made them the ſubject of particular injunctions, to have exemplified them by their own practice. Whatever approves itſelf as a duty to reaſon and a well-informed conſcience, therefore, is obligatory upon every follower of Jeſus, as a *Chriſtian duty*. For this deciſion we have the authority of an Apoſtle. Paul ſums up his apoſtolic directions to the church at Philippi with theſe words, "Finally, brethren, whatſoever things "are true, venerable, juſt, pure, lovely, of "good report, if there be any virtue, and if "any praiſe, think on theſe things." And,

as to all religious duties, our Saviour commands us, " to render unto God the things " that are God's." Where we have no particular directions, then, our own reaſon muſt tell us, what is virtuous, and praiſe-worthy, and due to God. And, as Chriſt ſays, he came to eſtabliſh the moral law in its fulleſt extent, where no ſpecific rule is upon record, his diſciples are under an obligation to ſupply it themſelves.

We may further deduce from the manner in which God has communicated his will to us, that, though in any particular inſtance, in which reaſon and conſcience approve an action, an *expreſs command* for the performance of it be *not* given; yet, if directions concerning the proper *manner*, or reproofs for the improper *manner* of performing it, are ſet before us, we ought to conſider theſe as neceſſarily implying the approbation and countenance of God himſelf to the practice. A divinely empowered teacher of true religion would never inveigh

inveigh againſt merely the mode of performing an action that was improper, ſuperſtitious, or wicked. He would forbid the action itſelf. And with reſpect to an indifferent action, he would never ſolemnly diſcountenance any mode of doing it, which did not involve guilt. Directions, then, given by a teacher from God, againſt any improper mode of performing any action which reaſon and conſcience approve, are confirmations of the authority of conſcience in that inſtance, and give an additional obligation to the performance of it in a proper manner. When Chriſt reproves the Phariſees for devouring widow's houſes, and for a pretence making long prayers; and when he forbids oſtentation, and vain repetitions, in addreſſes to God, he thereby indirectly enjoins prayers that are accompanied with right diſpoſitions and conduct, and that are preſented in a manner which beſpeaks the inward devotion of the heart. To forbid an exceſs or defect

in

in any practice, or to diſcountenance an error, is to enjoin moderation, and to countenance truth: elſe moral and religious diſcourſes againſt ſuperſtition, impiety, and vice, have no tendency to inculcate true religion and virtue.

Again, we may obſerve, that as Chriſt came not to deſtroy, but to eſtabliſh the moral law in its completeſt ſtate, whatever was commanded to the Jews, and is not either forbidden or diſpenſed with by Chriſt, or the ſpirit of his religion, continues to ſubſiſt as an obligation upon Chriſtians.

Let us remark further, that the abuſe of any thing which is reaſonable and right in itſelf, is no argument againſt the proper uſe of it. What has been more abuſed than religion? And what more than religion in its pureſt ſtate, as it came from the mouth of our divinely empowered maſter? The

beſt

beſt things may be abuſed, and the beſt things are uſually moſt abuſed. But the currency of a baſe coin proves, that there muſt have been a ſterling one ſomewhere. And the prevalence of ſuperſtition and hypocriſy demonſtrates, that there is ſuch a thing as pure and undefiled religion; elſe theſe could never have impoſed upon mankind. And true religion may be as ſincere and without oſtentation, in public as in private. The proper diſpoſition of the worſhipper conſtitutes the true piety of the act, wherever it is performed.

I add, that ſcripture phraſes, according to all good rules of interpretation, ought to be underſtood in the ſenſe in which they were uſually taken at the time when, and in the country in which, they were delivered.

Again, texts of a general nature, when applied to any particular ſubject, ought to be

be explained by the context, the general ſpirit and tendency of the goſpel, and the example of Chriſt.

The preceding train of reflections, concerning the proper way of applying ſcripture as the rule of our faith and practice, was ſuggeſted by the novel and extraordinary ſentiment of a very few Chriſtians, who imagine that public prayer is not obligatory upon them, though they think private prayer indiſpenſable. When the obligation to a practice of ſuch importance is made the ſubject of any doubt, it becomes us to attend to the ground of our own perſuaſion, and to conſider why we maintain ſocial and public prayer to be a Chriſtian duty. In ſtating the arguments that prove it to be ſo, we ſhall apply the general poſitions and reaſonings which we have already dwelt upon, to this particular ſubject, and ſubjoin ſome other conſiderations that coincide with them.

We

We may allow, then, without diminiſhing the ſtrength of our obligation to attend upon public prayer, that Chriſt is not mentioned in the goſpels to have ſaid any thing, in the abſolutely *direct form* of a *command*, to enjoin it: That is, he has not expreſſed himſelf in the *imperative mood*. But the language in which Jeſus conveyed his inſtructions, being alway peculiarly well ſuited to the then preſent occaſion and circumſtances, his ſtyle and phraſealogy muſt of courſe be ſuited to theſe. And we may eaſily imagine a variety of occurrences that might render a *direct* precept not ſo proper or uſeful, while the ſame ſentiment, conveyed in ſome other different form, might ſtrike the minds of the hearers, and influence their conduct. An uncommon variety, in the mode of conveying moral and religious inſtruction, occurs in our Saviour's life; in which we ſee his will, and his injunction, evidently and ſtrongly declared, where no *preceptive* form of ſpeech

is employed. Does not the parable of the prodigal Son aſſure us of the pardoning mercy of God, and exhort us to repentance, though our Lord does not lay down this moral in plain language diſtinct from the allegory? Will any ſay that the parable of the good Samaritan would not have been a clear injunction to the practice of univerſal benevolence, even though Chriſt had not ſubjoined, "Go and do thou likewiſe." The experience of every parent teaches him, that an indirect manner of enjoining a child to diſcharge a duty, is often the beſt way of impreſſing it upon his mind as a duty, and at the ſame time the moſt effectual to engage him to the performance of it.

In ſeveral inſtances we find, that Chriſt has not given an *expreſs command* for the performance of certain duties; or, if he did, the Evangeliſts have not tranſmitted them to us. The goſpels, indeed, only give ſpecimens of what

what Jeſus did and taught: They are only memoirs of his life, not regular details of his actions and inſtructions. They have not recorded any *expreſs command* of Chriſt himſelf upon his followers for gratitude, active valour, juſtice, temperance, the love of our country, or teaching the ſcriptures to children. In like manner public worſhip is not made the ſubject of a diſtinct precept in the goſpel.

Why then do we maintain all theſe to be Chriſtian duties? Is it not, principally, upon the general ground of their being approvable to reaſon and conſcience, and being agreeable to the ſpirit of true religion and Chriſtianity? And, beſides this, whatever inſtructions are given by Chriſt and his Apoſtles, that favour any, or all, of theſe duties, or whatever occurs in their examples to countenance them, are additional reaſons for the obſervance of them. And what diſciple of Jeſus heſitates, even upon theſe grounds, to maintain, that all

all the inſtances we have ſpecified are *Chriſtian duties?* A very few Chriſtians only have lately excepted that which is the ſubject of our preſent diſcourſe; though there ſeems to be no ground for its being made an exception, becauſe the reaſonableneſs and good effects of it are ſo ſingularly clear and evident, and it is ſo remarkably conſonant with the ſpirit and deſign of Chriſtianity.

That any ſingle duty is not particularly mentioned or enjoined in the New Teſtament, if it be obviouſly included under the general heads of inſtruction which Chriſt and his Apoſtles have delivered, is, therefore, no proper objection to its being a part of Chriſtian obligation. On the contrary, if any moral or religious act, founded upon principles of pure piety and virtue, was the general practice of the Jews, and of mankind, when our Lord appeared, and he did not intend his inſtructions to have been applied

plied to that particular caſe, an expreſs injunction *againſt* the continuance of it would have been particularly neceſſary from him, who profeſſed to teach a religion free from all burdenſome rites and ſuperſtitious obſervances, and who pointedly directed ſo many of his diſcourſes againſt the prevailing corruptions of the age and country in which he lived. And, eſpecially, would this prohibition have been neceſſary, if he countenanced this practice by his own example, in order to have prevented his diſciples from applying the general ſpirit of his religion, and his habitual conduct, to this particular inſtance. And both theſe remarks apply to public prayer.

But though Chriſt has not given an expreſs precept for public worſhip, yet many parts of the goſpels and New Teſtament clearly point it out, not only to be a duty, but a duty *enjoined by our Lord.* Several paſſages, I apprehend, cannot otherwiſe be properly interpreted. Let

Let us, firſt, conſider a few that refer to the *example* of Chriſt, as countenancing ſocial and public prayer.

There are many inſtances, no doubt, in which he choſe to uſe ſecret prayer. We find this frequently the caſe, when he was preparing for extraordinary duties and exertions, and after he had gone through them: But no argument can be drawn from this, that he did not likewiſe approve of public prayer, eſpecially as he practiſed it; which we ſhall now proceed to ſhew that he did. The fair concluſion from his practiſing both is, that he recommended both, each in its proper ſeaſon.

We begin with Luke ix. 18. "And it came "to paſs as he was alone praying, his diſ- "ciples were with him: and he aſked them, "ſaying," &c. This paſſage, in our tranſlation, is a little obſcure, but is more clear in a new tranſlation lately publiſhed, in which it is rendered thus: "And when he was "praying

" praying in a retired place, he aſked thoſe " diſciples, who were with him, ſaying:" &c. This implies that Jeſus and his diſciples were uniting in a ſocial act of prayer to God. Some paſſages in the following part of the ſame chapter ſhew, that by being *alone*, according to the common tranſlation, was not meant being quite by himſelf, but retired from all, excepting his diſciples.

The prayer (John xvii.) which our Lord ſubjoined to the affectionate and conſolatory addreſs which he gave to his apoſtles, juſt before he was betrayed, was uttered in their preſence; or how could they have tranſmitted it to us? And though it is expreſſed in the ſingular number, they probably joined in many of the petitions. The ſuppoſition that they did, is at leaſt as probable as that they did not. The purpoſe for which our Saviour uttered the prayer in their preſence, ſeems to have been, to excite in them devotion and gratitude towards the Supreme Being, and to

confirm them in their attachment to himſelf as the Sent of God; which ſome parts of the prayer ſhew that they acknowledged him to be. It is as reaſonable to ſuppoſe that they joined in this prayer, as that they joined with our Lord in giving thanks when he took the cup and the bread at the laſt ſupper; which was another inſtance of ſocial devotion with his apoſtles.

When Jeſus prayed to his Father, in the preſence of his diſciples and the multitude, juſt before he raiſed Lazarus from the dead, it muſt, ſurely, be conſidered as an act of ſocial worſhip. One expreſſion he uſes—"Becauſe of the people which ſtand by I ſaid "it, that they may believe that thou haſt "ſent me,"—ſeems to evince that he meant to excite their attention, and that they ſhould join in it. And, in the two laſt inſtances, though the ſingular number is uſed in the form of the addreſs, this might not ſtrike the Jews ſo much as it does us, becauſe they were

were in the habit of preſenting their prayers in the temple worſhip in this manner, though they undoubtedly conſidered them as public prayers, as we ſhall hereafter ſhew.

In Luke iii. 21, we are told, "When all "the people were baptized, it came to paſs, "that Jeſus alſo being baptized, and pray-"ing, the heaven was opened." The ſuppoſition that this prayer was deſigned for a ſocial one is moſt probable, from its being delivered before ſo many people, upon ſo ſolemn and intereſting an occaſion as the baptiſm of the Meſſiah, and immediately before the extraordinary public atteſtations which God then gave to his divine miſſion.

Jeſus likewiſe gave public thanks to God at the different times that he diſtributed the loaves and the fiſhes to the multitudes who attended his inſtructions.

John xii. 28. "Father, glorify thy name." This ejaculation, which Chriſt uttered before the people, was evidently deſigned to raiſe

their attention to the voice that came immediately after from heaven, which voice Jeſus declared to the people, who were doubtful what it was, came for their ſakes. The ejaculation, therefore, was plainly intended to excite in them religious ſentiments towards God, and faith in the extraordinary means he uſed, for atteſting Jeſus to be the Meſſiah. If the ſhortneſs of the addreſs be pleaded againſt its being a ſocial act, we are nearly as ſhort in our uſual addreſſes to God at our meals, which are undoubtedly ſocial.

But the moſt deciſive text relating to the example of Chriſt, is given us Luke iv. 16. "And he came to Nazareth, where he had "been brought up, and, as his *cuſtom* was, "he went into the ſynagogue on the ſab-"bath-day, and ſtood up to read." There are ſeveral paſſages in the goſpels, that ſpecify ſingle inſtances of our Saviour's attending in the ſynagogue; and it appears by this, that he habitually did ſo at the time of worſhip

worſhip on the ſabbath. The parts of worſhip then uſed, are well known to have been public prayer, reading the ſcriptures, and explaining them. There was an appointed miniſter in the ſynagogue, called the Angel of the Church, whoſe office it was, to offer up the public prayers to God for the whole congregation. Some of their forms of prayer, and thoſe on which they laid a principal ſtreſs, are handed down to us. It is particularly mentioned by Luke, that Jeſus read a paſſage in Iſaiah applicable to himſelf, and that he afterwards told the audience, "This "day hath this ſcripture been fulfilled in "your ears;" becauſe this circumſtance was moſt to the purpoſe of the Evangeliſt, who wrote, as John tells us he did, "that we "might believe that Jeſus was the Chriſt, "the Son of God, and that believing, we "might have life through his name." And no one ſurely will ſay, that Chriſt omitted to attend the ſynagogue prayers, and came

in merely to read and explain the ſcriptures. This ſuppoſition would be totally inconſiſtent with the habitual conduct of one who "fulfilled all righteouſneſs, and whoſe meat "and drink it was to do the will, and promote "the glory, of his heavenly Father." This text, then, in the goſpel of Luke, is a diſtinct and indiſputable proof, that Jeſus habitually attended public worſhip and public prayer. And, that it becomes all Chriſtians to imitate his example, no one will deny.

We ſhall now attend to ſome of the *precepts* of Chriſt that relate to this ſubject. Though there is no direction of Jeſus for public worſhip handed down to us, as delivered in the *imperative mood*, yet he has employed other ways of conveying his injunction on this ſubject, equally clear, deciſive, and ſatisfactory.

One mode in which he enjoins it is, by a quotation from the prophet Iſaiah, declarative of the uſe to which the temple at Jeruſalem

ſalem ought to be appropriated, and which we have read at the entrance upon our diſcourſe. In a recent tranſlation, however, it is, more accurately than in our common one, rendered thus, "This houſe of mine ſhall be "a houſe of prayer for all nations." Now if it be objected that the prayers uſed in the temple worſhip were preſented ſeparately and individually by each perſon, I anſwer, that public worſhip was not in the improved ſtate, at that time, in which it is now. The uſe of ſacrifices and incenſe ſhew this: for though theſe were part of a wiſe and divine inſtitution, yet that inſtitution itſelf was deſigned by God to be only temporary, and to give place to the more perfect one of Chriſtianity. As to the mode of offering their public prayers, they ſeem to have been left, as we are, to the exerciſe of their own judgments. Accordingly, in the ſynagogues, in which the whole aſſembly might diſtinctly hear one voice, and where they had neither

ſacrifices

ſacrifices nor incenſe, they uſed liturgies, which the miniſter read as the mouth of the whole congregation. But, at the temple, in which, on account of its ſize and ſtructure, a ſingle voice could not be heard by all the worſhippers, the prayers of the aſſembly were offered up ſeparately by each perſon, at the very time when the ſacrifices and incenſe were burning, during which time alſo, there were ſtationary men appointed to pray for the whole congregation of Iſrael. This was their public worſhip; becauſe they met together as a congregation in the temple of the Lord, and their united religious ſentiments, ſignified by the interceſſory prayers of the ſtationary men, and uttered by each in his own language, accompanied the ſacrifices and incenſe, which were the viſible ſymbols of their joint devotion. As a proof that this was conſidered as the united worſhip of the congregation, we need only advert to the conſecration of the firſt temple by Solomon;

at

at which he publicly requeſts of God, that he would "hearken to the ſupplication of his "people Iſrael, and would hear their prayer, "and the prayer of the ſtranger who worſhip-"ped in it." And Iſaiah, lvi. 4—7. in immediate connection with the paſſage we are now conſidering, which our Saviour quotes from him, ſays, "Thus ſaith the Lord, The "ſons of the ſtranger that love and ſerve "me, will I bring to my holy mountain, and "make joyful in my houſe of prayer: their "burnt-offerings and their ſacrifices ſhall be "accepted upon mine altar; for my houſe "ſhall be called a houſe of prayer for all "people." Here he ſpeaks of the prayers and the ſacrifices together, as if they were to be conſidered as preſented jointly, and in uniſon with each other. Jeſus, then, by addreſſing the buyers and ſellers in the temple, in an expreſs quotation from the prophet, correſponding to the words of Solomon at the dedication, adopts the ſentiment as his own,

and

and authoritatively confirms the precept, to uſe it as a houſe for ſocial public devotion. And his driving them out of the temple ſhews, in the ſtrongeſt manner, his abhorrence of their appropriation of it to a different and oppoſite purpoſe.

Again, Matth. xviii. 20. "Where two or "three are gathered together in my name, "there am I in the midſt of them." Perſons aſſembling as diſciples of Chriſt, to promote his cauſe, may employ different means for this end. They may either read the ſcriptures, or explain them, or join together in prayer; or they may do all. The promiſe, then, whether it be limited to the Apoſtles, or whether it extend to Chriſtians at large, extends to thoſe who join in ſocial prayer, as well as to thoſe who join in reading the ſcriptures, or explaining them; and, therefore, gives the ſanction of Chriſt to the practice. The connection in which the paſſage ſtands ſhews, that it has a peculiar relation

to

to ſocial addreſſes to God. In a new tranſlation the paſſage is thus rendered, "I ſay "unto you, if two of you agree about aſking "any matter, it will be granted then by my "Father, which is in heaven. For where "two or three are come together in my "name, there am I in the midſt of them." This is not only an approbation of ſocial requeſts to God, but it offers a ſtrong motive to uſing them. If it be ſaid, this countenances ſocial prayer only on particular occaſions, and is limited to the Apoſtles, I reply, that it does not forbid it to other perſons, on common ones; but rather recommends it, when taken in connection with the uſual practice at that time, and with the other paſſages of ſcripture that enjoin this duty.

In the Sermon on the Mount, there is another paſſage to our preſent purpoſe: "When thou prayeſt, thou ſhalt not be as "the hypocrites, for they love to pray ſtand-

"ing

"ing in the ſynagogues, and in the corners "of the ſtreets, that they may be ſeen of "men. Verily I ſay unto you, they have "their reward. But thou, when thou prayeſt, "enter into thy cloſet, and when thou haſt "ſhut thy door, pray to thy Father which is "in ſecret, and thy Father which ſeeth in "ſecret ſhall reward thee openly." Chriſt is here giving directions againſt oſtentation and hypocriſy in prayer; and particularly againſt ſaying private prayers in public places, in order that they may be noticed by others. This was a common practice at that time, and required a public teſtimony of his diſapprobation. But this does not forbid public worſhip, any more than the phraſe, "I "deſire mercy and not ſacrifice," forbids the Jews to uſe ſacrifices. This kind of phraſeology is common in ſcripture, and will be beſt illuſtrated by other ſimilar paſſages, which are evidently not to be taken ſtrictly and literally.

The

The ſtrongeſt expreſſion of this ſort is in Jeremiah vii. 21—23. "Thus ſaith the Lord "of Hoſts, the God of Iſrael, put your burnt-"offerings unto your ſacrifices, and eat fleſh; "for I ſpake not unto your fathers, nor "commanded them in the day that I brought "them out of the land of Egypt, concern-"ing burnt-offerings or ſacrifices, but this "thing commanded I them, ſaying, Obey my "voice, and I will be your God, and ye ſhall "be my people." This uſe of a negative phraſe, to expreſs only a comparative idea, was common among the Jews. They, therefore, never interpreted this, nor the numerous other texts of a like ſort, which are in the Old Teſtament, as commanding the abolition of ſacrifices, but only as preferring moral virtue to ceremonial obſervances.

Again our Saviour ſays, "If any man "come to me, and hate not his father and "mother, &c. and his own life alſo, he can-"not be my diſciple." Does any Chriſtian

interpret

interpret this literally? It is only deſigned to tell us, that we muſt prefer our duty to any thing in this world, and that nothing will prevent a true Chriſtian from doing it.

Again, "Jeſus cried and ſaid, He that be-"lieveth on me, believeth not on me, but on "him that ſent me." A new tranſlation of this paſſage gives a true explication of it. "And Jeſus cried out and ſaid: He, who be-"lieveth on me, believeth not *ſo much* on me, "as on him, who ſent me."

Peter ſays to Ananias, "Thou haſt not "lied unto men, but unto God." That is, your offence is greater againſt God than againſt men.

In all theſe quotations negative expreſſions are uſed to convey only comparative ideas, which ſhews that they are not always to be taken literally, but to be interpreted according to, the nature and reaſon of the particular caſe, the connection in which they are introduced, the ſpirit of true religion,

and

and of Chriſtianity, when they are in the New Teſtament. And as we have proved that Chriſt habitually attended ſocial public prayer, and that the connection of the paſſage in the Sermon on the Mount, evidently points out the prohibition to be directed againſt uſing private prayers in public places out of oſtentation, it cannot with any plauſibility be interpreted as forbidding public prayer.

This will more evidently appear in the continuation of our Lord's diſcourſe. For he takes occaſion from this to paſs on to other directions about prayer, forbidding vain repetitions, and then giving a general form and model of prayer, commonly called the Lord's Prayer.

The language uſed in this, ſhews plainly, that it was deſigned by Chriſt for a ſocial prayer, as well as for a private one. Now, if the benevolent ſpirit of Chriſtianity be pleaded as the reaſon for uſing the plural number in private, and as an argument againſt

againſt the public uſe of this prayer, ſurely the ſame benevolent ſpirit may be more ſtrongly pleaded, for the propriety of uſing it as a ſocial prayer; which will peculiarly cheriſh and increaſe that ſpirit, while at the ſame time it actually exerts it, in the worſhip of the great Author of the very powers and diſpoſitions which we poſſeſs to do good. The plural number is either uſed or implied throughout the whole prayer. The prayer itſelf was compiled from different parts of the public Jewiſh liturgies; excepting the ſingle ſentiment, "as we forgive them that "treſpaſs againſt us." And it is very ſimilar to that particular prayer which the Jews made uſe of, both at the beginning and concluſion of every public ſynagogue ſervice. All theſe circumſtances, taken together, ſo ſtrongly point out the deſign of Chriſt, that it ſhould be uſed, not merely in private, but as a ſocial prayer, that it would have required a particular caution from himſelf againſt

againſt this, if he meant it to be uſed in ſolitude only. Eſpecially when we conſider that his own cuſtomary practice was to attend public worſhip, and that he profeſſedly came to free mankind from burdenſome and uſeleſs obſervances, againſt which he always particularly inveighed, and ſaid, that "his "yoke was eaſy, and his burden light."

It cannot with any truth be ſaid, that ſocial worſhip, performed with Chriſtian ſimplicity, is a mere ceremonial and external ſervice. And ſo far from being burdenſome, one may appeal to the hearts of Chriſtians, whether they do not feelingly join with the Pſalmiſt, who ſays, "I was glad when they "ſaid unto me, let us go into the houſe of "the Lord." Public aſſemblies for worſhip give a ſingular and peculiar animation to all the pious, holy, and benevolent affections. And when theſe affections excite to habitual good conduct in life, which is their natural tendency, they are the pureſt ſources of ſatis-

faction and enjoyment that the mind of man can poſſeſs. As perfectly pure a homage, as true an inward devotion of the mind, to our common parent, may be, unaffectedly and without oſtentation, offered in the houſe of God, as can poſſibly be offered in the cloſet. It is not the place where, nor the ſolitary or ſocial manner in which, it is offered, that ſanctifies the act. It is the diſpoſition and conduct of the worſhipper, that makes it acceptable to him who looketh, not on the outward appearance, but on the heart; and who requires, that whenever, and wherever, and with whomſoever, we offer our prayers, we ſhould "worſhip in ſpirit and in "truth."

In the diſcourſe, therefore, which our Saviour held with the woman of Samaria, when he ſpeaks of the eſſence of true devotion, he does not contraſt ſpiritual worſhip to ſocial worſhip, but he contraſts it to that peculiar regard which both the Jews and Samaritans

tans had, each to their own particular place of worſhip. And he takes this occaſion for giving an excellent precept concerning the eſſential qualification of a true worſhipper of God, whoſe nature being ſpiritual and unconfined, the place where he was worſhipped would appear to be of no conſequence under the purer diſpenſation, which he (who at the cloſe of this converſation declared himſelf Meſſiah) was publiſhing, if the worſhippers were themſelves ſincere. The queſtion which the woman propoſed to our Saviour was, about the place where *public* worſhip ought to be performed. The anſwer, therefore, muſt correſpond to it, and implies evidently, that in *public* worſhip it was the diſpoſition of the worſhipper, and not the place, that ſanctified his devotion. By this deciſion he countenances and enjoins the practice of public worſhip, when performed in ſpirit and in truth. And, in order more ſtrongly to point out the qualification

of ſincerity, as eſſential to every act of devotion, in private as well as in public, he ſubjoins, to the full and direct anſwer which he had given to the queſtion, the following general ſentiment and direction: "God is a "Spirit, and they that worſhip him, muſt "worſhip him in ſpirit and in truth.

We have dwelt long upon the *example* and *inſtructions of Chriſt*, becauſe they are of principal importance, and becauſe they are referred to, as a chief ground of objection to this duty. But, with how little reaſon, you will judge.

If we look, in the next place, into the hiſtory of the Acts of the *Apoſtles*, we ſhall find ſeveral paſſages which indiſputably prove, that they conſidered public worſhip as a duty, becauſe *they* themſelves *habitually attended* upon it.

In the firſt chapter of this book we are told, that after the aſcenſion of Chriſt, the eleven Apoſtles returned to Jeruſalem, and there

there went into an upper room. It is added, "theſe all continued with one accord in "prayer, with the women, and Mary the "mother of Jeſus, and with his brethren." This paſſage expreſſes, that they perſevered in aſſembling together for ſocial worſhip. And in the ſame chapter is afterwards recorded a prayer which the apoſtle Peter, together with about an hundred and twenty diſciples, joined in offering up, previouſly to their election of a ſucceſſor to Judas.

In the ſecond chapter we are told, that after Peter's diſcourſe to the Jews and ſtrangers from various nations, that were aſſembled at Jeruſalem on the "day of Pentecoſt, there "were added to the Chriſtian Church about "three thouſand ſouls. And they continued "ſtedfaſtly in the Apoſtles doctrine and fel-"lowſhip, and in breaking of bread, and in "prayers." In the next verſe but one it is added, "And all that believed were together, "and had all things common; and ſold their

" poſſeſſions and goods, and parted them to " all, as every man had need. And they, con- " tinuing daily with one accord in the temple, " and breaking bread from houſe to houſe, did " eat their meat with gladneſs and ſingleneſs " of heart, praiſing God, and having favour " with all the people." This paſſage gives an account of the united tranſactions of upwards of three thouſand perſons, ſeveral of whom were, of courſe, ſtrangers to each other a ſhort time before; and it is ſtrongly expreſſive of a ſingular unanimity of ſentiment and conduct ſubſiſting among them. The particulars that are here ſpecified, are noticed as inſtances of this. And it would be an unnatural force upon the meaning of the paſſage, to ſeparate prayer from the reſt of theſe ſocial acts.

The third chapter begins thus, " Now " Peter and John went up together into the " temple, at the hour of prayer." As the object which the writer had in view was, to prove

prove Jeſus to be the Chriſt, he relates the miracle which Peter wrought for this purpoſe, and his ſubſequent diſcourſe, with the effect of it, without particularly expreſſing that the Apoſtles joined in the temple worſhip. This, however, is evidently implied.

In the continuation of this narrative, in the fourth chapter, we are told, that after Peter and John had left the Sanhedrim, before which they had been examined about this miracle, "they went to their own company, "who lifted up their voice to God with one "accord," in a prayer, which the Evangeliſt Luke has tranſmitted to us. As the prayer itſelf was dictated by their unanimous ſentiments, ſo it is related that the effects of it were the ſame upon all; for "they were all "filled with the Holy Spirit, and they ſpake "the word of God with boldneſs. And the "multitude of them that believed were of "one heart, and of one ſoul."

In the ſixth chapter we are informed, that the whole multitude of the diſciples

choſe

choſe Stephen and ſix others for Deacons, "whom they ſet before the Apoſtles; and "when they had prayed, they laid their hands "on them."

In the twelfth chapter it is related, that while Peter was kept in priſon by Herod, "prayer was made without ceaſing of the "church unto God for him."

In the thirteenth chapter Barnabas and Paul are mentioned to have been ſet apart for preaching the goſpel among the Gentiles, on which occaſion, [new tranſlation] "*the* "*church*, after faſting and praying, and laying "hands on them, ſent them away." When they came to Antioch in Piſidia, they attended at the ſynagogue on the ſabbath-day. They, therefore, of courſe, joined in the ſeveral parts of the ſervice, one of which was prayer. And, after the reading of the law and the prophets, Paul preached to the people.

In the fourteenth chapter it is ſaid, that after having left Antioch, and returning thither

thither again, "when they had ordained "elders in every church, and had prayed, "with faſting, they commended them to the "Lord." This was a ſocial act of worſhip.

In the ſixteenth chapter it is related, that Paul and Timothy coming together to Philippi, "on the ſabbath-day went out of "the city, by a river's ſide, where prayer "was wont to be made, and ſat down, and "ſpake unto the women which reſorted "thither." An oratory or place of prayer is thought, by ſome, to have been built here. But whether this was the caſe or not, the women being ſpoken of as reſorting there, ſhews that it was a place in which they uſually aſſembled for ſocial prayer. In the ſame chapter it is ſaid, "Paul and Silas "prayed, and ſang praiſes to God," in the priſon.

In the ſeventeenth chapter we are told, that Paul "came to Theſſalonica, where was "a ſynagogue of the Jews. And, as his *man-*

"*ner*

"*ner* was, he went in unto them, and three "ſabbath-days reaſoned with them out of "the ſcriptures, &c." This ſpeaks of Paul as *habitually* attending public worſhip in the ſynagogue.

In the twentieth chapter it is ſaid, that at Troas, "upon the firſt day of the week, "when the diſciples came together to break "bread, Paul preached unto them." The phraſe of coming together to break bread, was commonly uſed for the Lord's Supper, which was an act of ſocial worſhip, and in which they joined at the concluſion of their church ſervice every firſt day of the week. And a common meal would not ſurely have been noticed here by the hiſtorian, as the peculiar occaſion of their aſſembling on this day, when the circumſtance of Paul's preaching would have been of ſo much more conſequence than that.

Again, in the ſame chapter, after Paul had exhorted the elders of the church of Epheſus,

Epheſus, " he kneeled down, and prayed with " them all."

Finally, in the twenty-firſt chapter it is related, that when Paul was leaving Tyre, " all the diſciples brought him and his com- " pany on their way, with wives and children, " 'till they were out of the city, and they " kneeled down on the ſhore, and prayed."

Some of the paſſages which we have produced, relative to the example of the Apoſtles, ſpeak of their attending ſocial and public worſhip on extraordinary occaſions, others upon common ones, and their general habit of attending it is mentioned, or neceſſarily implied, in three different texts. As prayer was well known to have been a part of their public ſervice, it was not neceſſary to particularize their attendance upon this, when they went to the ſynagogue, any more than it is neceſſary, when you ſay a perſon attends church on a Lord's day, or at other times of public ſervice, to add that he joins in the prayers,

prayers, as well as hears the ſcriptures read, and the ſermon preached. The one implies the other. And as the chief deſign of Luke, in writing the book of Acts, was, not to delineate the character and conduct of the Apoſtles, but to give ſome accounts of the teſtimony which they bore to the reſurrection and divine miſſion of Jeſus, and to ſhew in what manner Chriſtianity was firſt preached and propagated, the paſſages that ſpeak particularly of their attending public worſhip, are as numerous, and as deciſive, as could have been expected in ſuch conciſe memoirs. They are abundantly ſufficient to convince any perſon, upon the ſame evidence as that on which we believe other hiſtorical facts, that an attendance upon public prayer, as well as inſtruction, was then the habitual practice of the Apoſtles, and the Chriſtian Church in general. The evidence, that they did attend ſocial and public prayer, is ſo often repeated, and is ſo direct and

ſtrong,

ſtrong, that it would require ſtill more powerful poſitive evidence on the contrary ſide, to convince us that they did not. But no ſuch evidence, I believe, has ever been alleged.

Beſides the *example* of the Apoſtles, we have ſome *precepts* and *directions* relative to this ſubject, recorded in the eleventh and twelfth chapters of the firſt epiſtle of Paul to the Corinthians. From the 17th verſe of the 11th chapter to the end of it, Paul reproves the Chriſtians at Corinth, for their improper behaviour at the Lord's Supper, and reminds them of the injunction which he received from Chriſt himſelf, that they ſhould join together in this act of ſocial worſhip.

Almoſt the whole of the fourteenth chapter of this letter is employed, in diſcountenancing the *improper* manner in which the Corinthian Chriſtians exerciſed their ſpiritual gifts, in their *public* aſſemblies for religious worſhip. The ſixteenth and ſeventeenth

verſes

verſes are thus rendered in a new tranſlation: "For, if thou bleſs *God* to thyſelf *only*, how "ſhall the unlearned *hearer* ſay Amen! after "thy thankſgiving, when he underſtandeth "not what thou art ſaying? For thou in-"deed giveſt thanks well, but thy neigh-"bour is not improved." Here the Apoſtle reproves thoſe who had the gift of tongues, for uſing it in ſuch a manner in their *public* aſſemblies for prayer, as to render themſelves unintelligible.

In the ſame chapter the Apoſtle gives a very few directions for the *proper* manner of uſing their gifts at ſuch ſeaſons. He ſays, "Let "all things be done to edifying;" and, "let "all things be done decently, and in order." Theſe directions apply to public prayer, of which he had been ſpeaking in the former chapter, full as much as to any other part of public worſhip, and therefore enjoins it. Nay, one of them is particularly pointed to it, by an obſervation made in the ſeventeenth verſe,

verſe, that when any pray in an unknown tongue, " the unlearned is not edified."

The Apoſtle writes this letter to the Corinthians while he is at a diſtance from them. His directions themſelves, and the manner in which they are expreſſed, imply that their meetings for public worſhip were *habitual*. And his giving theſe injunctions, ſome againſt the improper manner, and others concerning the proper manner, of performing public worſhip in general, ſhews his approbation of this cuſtomary practice.

Chriſtians, from the time of the Apoſtles to the preſent age, have indeed been left without any expreſs command, as to the mode of offering up ſocial prayers. The precepts for conducting public worſhip decently, and in order, and to edification, together with the general directions relative to prayer in the New Teſtament, and the model which our Lord has given us, were thought ſufficient to guide us. In applying theſe general rules,

rules, different perſons will, of courſe, be led to different methods. And ſome, for want of diſcernment or due attention, may deviate much from propriety, and the purpoſe of true religion and chriſtianity; as the Corinthians did even during the life of the Apoſtle. But this very chapter proves, that the impropriety of the manner in which public worſhip is conducted, is no proper objection againſt the obligation of the duty itſelf. For, in conſequence of the improprieties practiſed by the Corinthians, the Apoſtle does not adviſe them to deſiſt from aſſembling together, but corrects their errors, and enjoins it upon them to conduct themſelves in a decent and orderly manner, and ſo as to promote the general improvement. And this evidently implies his *injunction*, that they ſhould meet for public worſhip, and his firm ſentiment and perſuaſion that public worſhip, properly conducted, promotes the edification of Chriſtians.

Can

Can we doubt, then, that both the example and injunctions, both of Chriſt and his Apoſtles, inſtead of forbidding or diſcountenancing public worſhip, very ſtrongly enforce the practice as a Chriſtian duty?

It is further alleged, however, that public worſhip is inconſiſtent with the *ſpirit* of the *religion* of Jeſus.

But the ſpirit and deſign of the goſpel can never, ſurely, be contrary to the habitual practice of him, who "left us an example, "that we might follow his ſteps." Nor can it contradict the clear inſtructions which both He, and his Apoſtles, gave to the world, in the high character they ſuſtained, as the divinely commiſſioned teachers of the human race.

If, however, what has been already ſpecified reſpecting theſe, be thought inſufficient to characterize the ſpirit of Chriſtianity, let us further reflect, whether the heart that feels the joy of ſocial affections, can eaſily

refrain from employing them by uniting with others, in reverent and grateful addreſſes to Him who beſtowed them. Will not the Author of our affections approve this natural unaffected mode of exerciſing them? And Jeſus never diſcountenanced what his heavenly Father approved. A religion, characterized by its benevolence, can never, ſurely, ſuppreſs any exertion of the ſocial feelings that is innocent, much leſs any that edifies.

Is it poſſible that the ſpirit of a wiſe and divine inſtitution, intended for the uſe of all mankind, to the end of time, ſhould be unfriendly to a mode of worſhip, which is peculiarly calculated to ſpread and perpetuate it? Can a religion, diſtinguiſhed for the purity of its doctrines, the excellency of its precepts, and an unſpotted pattern, reject a mode of exemplifying it before the world, which exhibits a public ſtanding teſtimony in favour of true religion and virtue, and

which

which is a powerful means of preſerving what regard to God and goodneſs there does remain amongſt men in private life?

Will he who commands us, to confeſs him before men, diſapprove this eaſy and effectual way of doing it?

He, who has brought life and immortality to the cleareſt light, would not, ſurely, forbid ſuch worſhip as moſt elevates our hearts above the world, and fixes it more firmly on the glory that ſhall be revealed hereafter.

Chriſtianity, while it enjoins virtue as the will of God, ſurely does not diſcountenance that worſhip, which produces the greateſt awe and reverence of him, which peculiarly confirms our pious confidence, and animates religious joy.

Can an inſtitution, the precepts of which require nothing but what is compriſed in love to God and man, diſcourage a mode of worſhip, which unites men to each other more firmly, and raiſes their hearts in uniſon

to the common beſtower of every deſire, capacity, and means of doing good? Is not love to our common parent, and to our whole race, thus more abundantly enlarged in our own hearts, and in the hearts of others?

Is it poſſible, that the teacher, who commanded us to "let our light ſo ſhine before "men, that they may ſee our good works, "and glorify our heavenly Father," can diſapprove an aſſembly of humble worſhippers, who offer their devotions to God in the preſence of each other, only that they may do their duty? Is not this, in the true ſpirit of Chriſtianity, exemplifying by an outward act the piety of the heart within? Does not this increaſe the ſame ſpirit, in every individual breaſt, and in the ſurrounding worſhippers? And is not our common parent thus more glorified?

Can that ſpirit, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, eaſy to be intreated, full of mercy, and

and of good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocriſy, diſcourage us from aſſembling together to addreſs him, who is holineſs and benevolence itſelf, and the united contemplation of whoſe excellencies muſt have a peculiar tendency, to purify the heart, and foſter every benign emotion?

Can ſocial addreſſes to the wiſe univerſal parent, and ſource of all good, be unſuitable to a religion whoſe genius is, "not a ſpirit of "fear, but of power, of love, of joy, and of "a ſound mind?"

We have evinced it to be the ſentiment of an Apoſtle, that ſocial worſhip edifies. And let me aſk Chriſtians in general, whether aſſemblies for devotion do not improve Chriſtian knowledge, eſtabliſh Chriſtian faith, ſtrengthen Chriſtian diſpoſitions, increaſe the purity, the benevolence, and piety of the life and converſation, animate Chriſtian hope, and raiſe our hearts to heaven? And is this inconſiſtent with the ſpirit of that "doctrine "which is according to godlineſs? We

We ſhall cloſe with replying to an objection that is made to this duty, from the progreſſive practical perfection of mankind. It is ſaid, that the advanced period of Chriſtianity in which we live, is the period of manhood and maturity, and that public worſhip is unſuitable to ſuch a ſtate.

And it, no doubt, is unſuitable to it, if we need it not to expreſs, to excite, to confirm, to animate, and to increaſe, our piety and virtue. But this period ſurely is not arrived. Even Chriſt himſelf paid habitual homage to his heavenly Father. To arrive at ſuch a ſtate this mortal muſt put on immortality. Nay, when we reach the future world, we ſhall have eternal reaſons to praiſe the Author of our being for his mercies, and to aſk the continued influence of his ſupporting hand. Angels themſelves are repreſented to us, as paying the humbleſt tribute of worſhip, to the great ſource of all perfection and of all felicity. And, when we meet the happy ſpirits

MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY
UNITARIAN COLLECTION

ſpirits in the regions of immortality, we ſhall delight to join " the innumerable multitude " of all nations, and kindreds, and tongues, " and the angels who ſtand round the throne, " in aſcribing ſalvation, and bleſſing, and " glory, and wiſdom, and thankſgiving, and " honour, and power, unto our God, for ever " and ever."

THE END.